

COASTAL HERITAGE

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Salty Dogs

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Burnie Jackson, a McClellanville crabber, pulls one of his 60 traps from the creek bottom. PHOTO/WADE SPEES



A STITCH IN TIME. Last summer, Junior Magwood repaired a net at Magwood Seafood Company on Mt. Pleasant's Shem Creek.

PHOTO/MIC SMITH/COURTESY OF THE POST AND COURIER



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The Salty Dogs

Would you notice if South Carolina's commercial fishermen disappeared?

By John H. Tibbetts

Junior Magwood, known among local shrimpers for his feistiness and pungent vocabulary, is retired now, slowed by diabetes and dialysis treatments. But at 72, he still mends nets in a shed behind Magwood Seafood Company on Mt. Pleasant's Shem Creek, remembering the early 1940s when his cousin owned the only shrimping vessel in the Charleston area.

Called "Cap'n" by his friends, Magwood has witnessed extraordinary changes in South Carolina's fishing industry. When he started apprenticing on his cousin's boat at age 14, he worked brutal hours and relied on remarkably primitive equipment. In good weather, he left the Shem Creek dock with two other crewmen on a converted freight boat in search of shrimp, dragging the sea bottom with nets that they hauled up without benefit of winches, using just block and tackle—and brute strength. Weighing 120 pounds then, he got injured,

severely pulling muscles, until he learned how to lift the nets properly. "You couldn't do but three drags a day because by then you were wore out. The nets were heavy with water and jellyfish. Filled your damn net with that jellyfish."

Storms battered the ship as the crew struggled with the catch. "When a squall's coming, you have to get the net up, but the squall hits you, and you can't see what you're doing or where you're going. A lot of times we'd just drift until the squall was over, half-leaning overboard, trying to get the net up."

At the dock, "you had to 'head' all the shrimp," says Magwood, "and the shrimp acid would get into the quicks of your fingers, down in there, and fester up. Your hands were rubbed raw." Then it was time to fix the nets, torn by old anchors and sunken boats along the bottom. "You had to patch them the best you knew how."

His friend Frank Burns, 82, who first went shrimping in 1930 on his father's boat around Daufuskie Island, remembers how "we started with just a cast net, dragging just a little piece of webbing behind us."

From such scrappy beginnings, shrimping became a mainstay of the state's commercial fishing industry. Magwood and Burns are among the last of the men who built up South Carolina's commercial seafood industry after World War II. Today, it's a sophisticated high-tech enterprise. Shrimpers hunt down their prey with depth recorders and global positioning systems, dragging large nylon nets across the sea bottom and pulling in catches with hydraulic winches.

In several Atlantic coast states—Maine and Maryland come to mind—commercial fishing was a central element of their economies and cultures for several generations. Until the twentieth century, South Carolina's seafood industry, overshadowed by agriculture, was a negligible economic and social force. Then, from 1900 until World War II, oysters were king, but this success was limited primarily to Beaufort and Charleston counties. It was only after the war that blue crab and shrimp fisheries became dominant.

Today, many fishermen run diversified businesses, harvesting two and even three kinds of seafood. From October to April, they might pick oysters and clams. From early summer to Christmas, they can trawl for shrimp. And they can work crab traps year-round.

But even the savviest, most diversified fishermen worry about staying afloat, enduring rising fuel prices, tougher environmental regulations, closures of polluted harvesting grounds, public concern about trawling's effects on sea bottoms and turtles, and massive seafood imports. Under this flurry of pressures, small-scale fishermen could get squeezed out, forced down

the path of modern crop farmers. With ever-growing demands for productivity, crop farmers pay for giant combines and tractors and intricate computer programs that analyze which crops to plant and when to apply fertilizer and pesticides. Only the most efficient farmers with the best tools and financing can survive. The same idea goes for fishermen.

In 1980, the average shrimp boat was about 50 feet long, according to Anthony Lettich, 69, who started fishing in Beaufort County in 1947 and owned his first boat in 1953. Today's average boat, he says, is 65 feet long, and there are growing numbers of 70- to 80-foot steel-hulled boats, which can pull faster, work in rougher waters, and catch more shrimp that can be held in on-board freezers. Many of the larger boats belong to fishermen who live outside of South Carolina and come here for the season, then return home. Over the next decade, there will be fewer local shrimpers, driven out by consolidation, Lettich says. "The day of the small boat is almost over."

In dozens of coastal towns, glossy condos and restaurants have replaced the weathered waterfronts where fishermen bought fuel and ice, received dealer credit, and sold their catches—essential elements of the commercial fishing infrastructure. "Boats are losing places to go because of development," says Rutledge Leland, who has run Carolina Seafood in McClellanville since 1971.

Leland's waterfront property must seem an unpolished diamond to developers. As the Charleston metro area sprawls up the coast and McClellanville gets further drawn into the city's commuting orbit, developers will seek to build along the village's creeks. Eventually, Leland suggests, someone will make him an offer he can't refuse. He's been packing and selling seafood for 30 years, and "it's hard work," he

says, "with tough hours and inconsistent income." As men who own dock facilities grow old and retire, "there's no sign of young blood coming into the business. The next generation, are they going to want to pack seafood? I doubt it. The facility situation is extremely fragile."

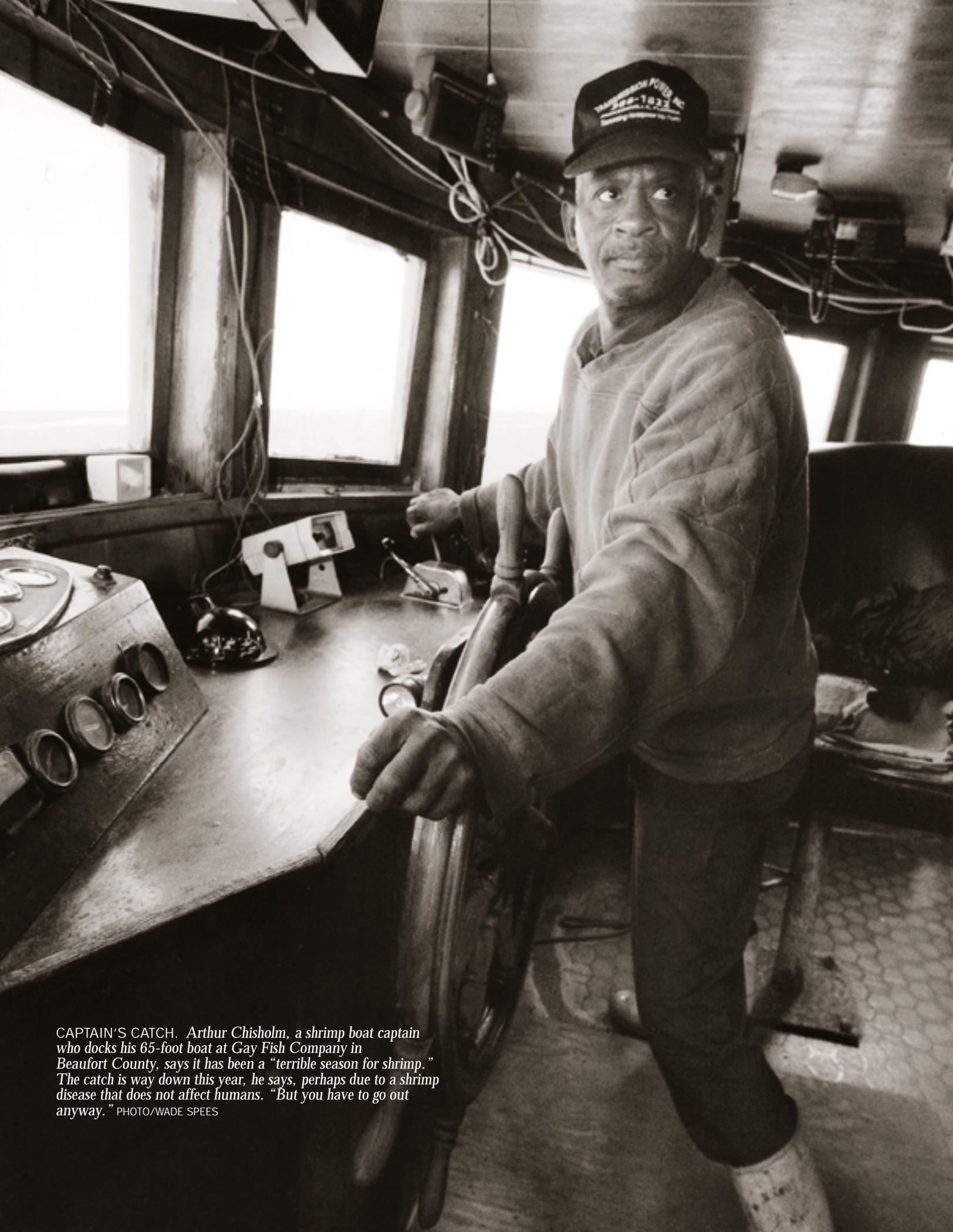
Today, the value of South Carolina's commercial fishing industry is small, bringing in about \$30 million a year, compared to that of the coastal retirement and tourism juggernaut at about \$9 billion a year. Although commercial fishermen still wield considerable political clout, they claim that they are steadily losing out to recreational fishing interests and developers. In Beaufort County, the signs are unmistakable, says Charles Gay, who co-owns a waterfront dock where numerous fishermen tie their boats. "It's hard to say how much longer shrimping will last. It's fading away."

But David Smith, seafood specialist with Clemson University, argues that it's too early to mourn the decline of the coast's fishing fleet. "Shrimpers and crabbers will say, 'I love what I'm doing, but I don't know if I'll make it another year.' When they have a good season, they do all right. The people who are doing it now, they find a way to keep going."

SMALL BOATS

The story of South Carolina's early fishing industry is one of men in small boats darting through Lowcountry creeks and estuaries in search of food.

Navigating in dugout canoes, Native Americans were skillful fishermen who traded seafood for firearms and clothing with early European settlers. Slaves quickly learned local byways and fishing techniques from Indians, though many Africans were already skilled artisans themselves, having lived in coastal areas with ancient fishing



CAPTAIN'S CATCH. Arthur Chisholm, a shrimp boat captain who docks his 65-foot boat at Gay Fish Company in Beaufort County, says it has been a "terrible season for shrimp." The catch is way down this year, he says, perhaps due to a shrimp disease that does not affect humans. "But you have to go out anyway." PHOTO/WADE SPEES



Last one

Bluffton Oyster Company is the last large oyster shucking operation left in Beaufort County. The company hires about 10 harvesters or “pickers” (traditionally men) and 10 shuckers (traditionally women) who release meat from the shell.

Factory manager Larry Toomer says he doesn’t have trouble keeping oyster pickers, who are paid by how many bushels they bring in. The demand for oysters is strong, the nearby resource is plentiful, and harvests have been rising every year for nine years. But he can’t find enough shuckers, who are paid by the hour; young people don’t want to do it anymore.

“The oyster business is so labor-intensive,” Toomer says. “There are the labor problems and rules and regulations with the health department, and most of the guys just gave up. It wasn’t feasible anymore.”

Toomer would like the company to invest in a new kind of automated system involving hydrostatic pressure that turns the meat loose from the shell. “But the price-tag for that system is way up there.”

traditions, according to a 1974 book by Duke University historian Peter H. Wood. As late as 1775, one writer claimed that “one Indian, or dextrous negroe, will, with his gun and nets, get as much game and fish as five families can eat.”

Many slaves had to fish and hunt because protein rations on rice plantations were small or nonexistent, noted historian Philip D. Morgan of the College of William & Mary in a 1998 book. Under the labor system on Lowcountry rice plantations, slaves completed their tasks by mid-afternoon and spent the rest of their day running their own sidelines, which included fishing.

Black folk dominated local maritime trades in the slavery era. Virtually all commerce and travel was by waterway, and blacks ran many of the region’s smaller boats. When Charleston travelers wanted to visit a coastal plantation, they’d typically hire a slave-operated canoe or launch. Blacks who learned the waterways could exploit their knowledge. By the mid-18th century, slaves and free blacks had established a near-monopoly on the fishing trade in Lowcountry towns. In 1770, the South Carolina legislature acknowledged, “The business of Fishing is principally carried on by Negroes, Mulattoes, and Mestizoes.”

Each day in good weather, a number of small vessels called the “mosquito fleet” sailed out of Charleston Harbor. Slaves who fished for their owners or who bought time from slaveholders crewed the mosquito fleet as did free blacks and men of Indian blood and “Spaniards.”

At some point, Yankees became the most productive fishermen in the Charleston area. By 1860, 15 New England “smacks”—ships fitted with wells to hold live fish—sailed south to Charleston in the fall and remained until May, catching black sea bass known today as blackfish. A smack could catch 30,000 blackfish each year on the banks 10 to 20 miles offshore. Charleston dealers kept fish alive in partly submerged cages along the rivers, supplying regional markets, such as Savannah, during winter months. During hot weather, though, dealers worried about their shipments spoiling, and blackfish

were sold only in Charleston.

Soon after the Civil War, South Carolinians bought a majority of the New England smacks, and Charleston remained a principal fishing center along the southern Atlantic seaboard. But by the 1890s, after improving their railroad connections to inland and northern markets, Savannah and several Florida communities took over as the region’s most important fish suppliers and wholesalers.

At the close of the century, many Gullah people—former slaves and their descendants who lived along coastal rivers and on sea islands—farmed their own small plots, producing vegetables for local markets and supplementing their diet and income by oystering and fishing.

The mosquito fleet still sailed out of the harbor and caught blackfish, porgy, bastard snapper, whiting, summer trout, and croaker. Fishermen sold catches to hawkers, who pushed carts through the streets, shouting out their wares. Porgy was considered particularly tasty, inspiring a peddler’s chant as well as the main character’s name in DuBose Heyward’s novel *Porgy* and the famous opera he created with George and Ira Gershwin, *Porgy and Bess*:

Porgy walk

Porgy talk

Porgy eat wid a knife and fawk;

Porgie-e-e-e

The era of commercial fishing by sailboat was over by 1940. Some fishermen, however, in the 1920s bought one- or two-cylinder gasoline engines, which made an unmuffled *pocketa-pocketa-pop* sound, providing more noise than speed. These gas engines were dangerous: if fumes built up in the bilge, a spark could set off an explosion, blowing up the ship. “At least once a year,” says McClellanville shrimper Jimmy Leland, “there’d be an explosion. A lot of times a man would get killed.”

By the 1930s, with the advent of better roads and bridges to the islands, trucks could haul cheaper than freight boats, which were sold for a song. Junior Magwood apprenticed on a converted freight boat that carried fertilizers to sea island farms and brought back vegetables to the riverboat docks. His cousin turned one into a shrimp boat, as did later fishermen, who

also bought old Navy wooden landing craft called “buttheads.” Mosquito fleet fisherman bought buttheads as well—about 20 to 30-foot long—from the Charleston Naval Shipyards.

In Charleston, an odd assortment of fishing craft tied up at Adger’s Wharf, gone now, replaced by a park.

Author Louis B. Rubin, Jr., in a 1991 book, described how the docks looked in the mid-1930s. “The trawlers and other workboats that did tie up at Adger’s Wharf tended to be motley affairs, many of them owned by black fishermen and painted with garish colors and odd decorations, including more than one ‘eye’ to ward off the evil spirits lurking in the deep.”

A 1940 hurricane struck the South Carolina coast and swamped most of the mosquito fleet. After World War II, local fishermen began using diesel engines, which were safer and much more powerful. Diesel engines allowed larger boats to pull bigger nets for greater catches. As the mosquito fleet faded away, fishermen found jobs on the newer 40- to 45-foot diesel-powered shrimp vessels.

THE LUSCIOUS BIVALVE

South Carolina’s golden age of commercial fishing began about 30 years after the Civil War, when businessmen invested in railroad links that penetrated the Deep South’s farthest reaches. At a time when the states of the old Confederacy desperately needed new investments and markets, veg-

etables and seafood from southern coastlines began pouring into Northern cities by way of refrigerated railroad cars.

Oysters, prized by urban denizens of the Gilded Age, were the first South Carolina seafood product shipped in large quantities by rail. In the 1870s, Philadelphians ate an

investors found new resources, including those of coastal South Carolina.

In 1886, for the first time, South Carolina shellfish were shipped through Savannah to the hungry metropolises in the Midwest and along the eastern seaboard. The local industry grew quickly. Savannah’s



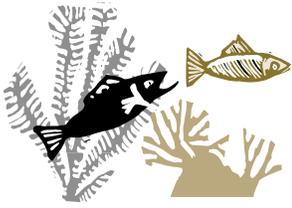
BLUE PLATE SPECIAL. “This is hard work, but the heaviest thing is an empty trap,” says Arthur Ford, a waterman in Beaufort County, showing a day’s catch of blue crab. PHOTO/WADE SPEES

average of six oysters a week, and 12 a week during oyster-harvesting season. In 1887, a U.S. government report described how New Yorkers went wild over the “luscious bivalve,” which they ate in almost every imaginable recipe: “Oysters picked, stewed, baked, roasted, fried, and scalloped; oysters made into soups, patties, and puddings; oysters with condiments and without condiments; oysters for breakfast, dinner, supper; oysters without stint or limit, fresh as the pure air, and almost as abundant, are daily offered to the palates of the Manhattanese, and appreciated with all the gratitude which such a bounty of nature ought to inspire.”

When northern and Chesapeake Bay oyster banks were over-exploited,

Maggioni & Company established its first cannery on Daufuskie Island in 1893, and eventually opened five more canneries in Beaufort County. These canneries were among the 16 oyster factories in operation in South Carolina between 1893 and 1905.

During fall and winter, Gullah men went out in flat-bottomed boats called “bateaux,” or in larger sloops or engine-powered scows, from which they used short-handled “grabs” to harvest oysters from the riverbanks. In deep water, they used long-handled tongs. One man could gather 60 to 100 bushels during a low tide. The men transported oysters to the factories, where the shellfish were steamed and shucked and canned. Sea island women, and sometimes



Local resource

South Carolina's seafood industry was never a powerful force partly because our finfish populations have been small compared to those of nearby states. "With its rich coastal sounds and flounder, croaker, and spot fisheries offshore, North Carolina has a much larger natural resource that we have here," says David Smith, seafood specialist with Clemson University. And farther south, Florida fishermen a century ago established a seafood industry based on commercially valuable species that live around coral reefs and submerged cliffs and rocky bottoms nearshore.

Along the South Carolina coast, Smith points out, "the ocean is fairly flat until you get far offshore, where you have rapid changes in elevation, and that's where you find the coral and tropical and near-tropical species like grouper." Only since the 1960s have large commercial boats exploited these fisheries 40 miles from the South Carolina mainland. Before that, fishermen concentrated on species they could harvest more easily in estuaries or within 10 to 20 miles from land.

Commercial finfish species, such as spot and croaker, are typically scrawny here, says David Whitaker, director of S.C. Department of Natural Resources environmental management office. Relatively few individual fish among these species grow big in South Carolina waters. "They are more common at a larger size in the mid-Atlantic, though no one seems to know why," says Whitaker. "Perhaps some of our fish migrate up and mature farther north."



children, worked long hours in shucking houses.

In 1977, Gilbert Maggioni reminisced about the typical black watermen who worked for his family's oyster factories: "He lived probably not far from the creek and of course in the winter time he would gather oysters for one of the oyster plants and in the summer time he farmed. . . And the individual himself developed muscularly in the certain way. He was spindle-legged but about three feet across at the shoulders, and he could pop or break store-boat oars just as fast as you handed them to him . . . It was no uncommon thing for one of these gentlemen to row from Bluffton to Beaufort [22 miles] to buy groceries."

Sea islanders, skilled at harvesting and shucking, were unfamiliar with industrial cannery operations. Initially, experienced cannery workers, mostly of Polish descent, came down each winter from Baltimore to labor in some factories. In other factories, however, Gullah people received cannery training, and African-Americans became the main source of factory labor.

After the boll weevil ruined sea island cotton and the phosphate industry declined, local blacks turned to oyster plants for work. In the first half of the twentieth century, "blacks had a chance at only two basic types of labor: farm labor and working in canneries," says Skipper

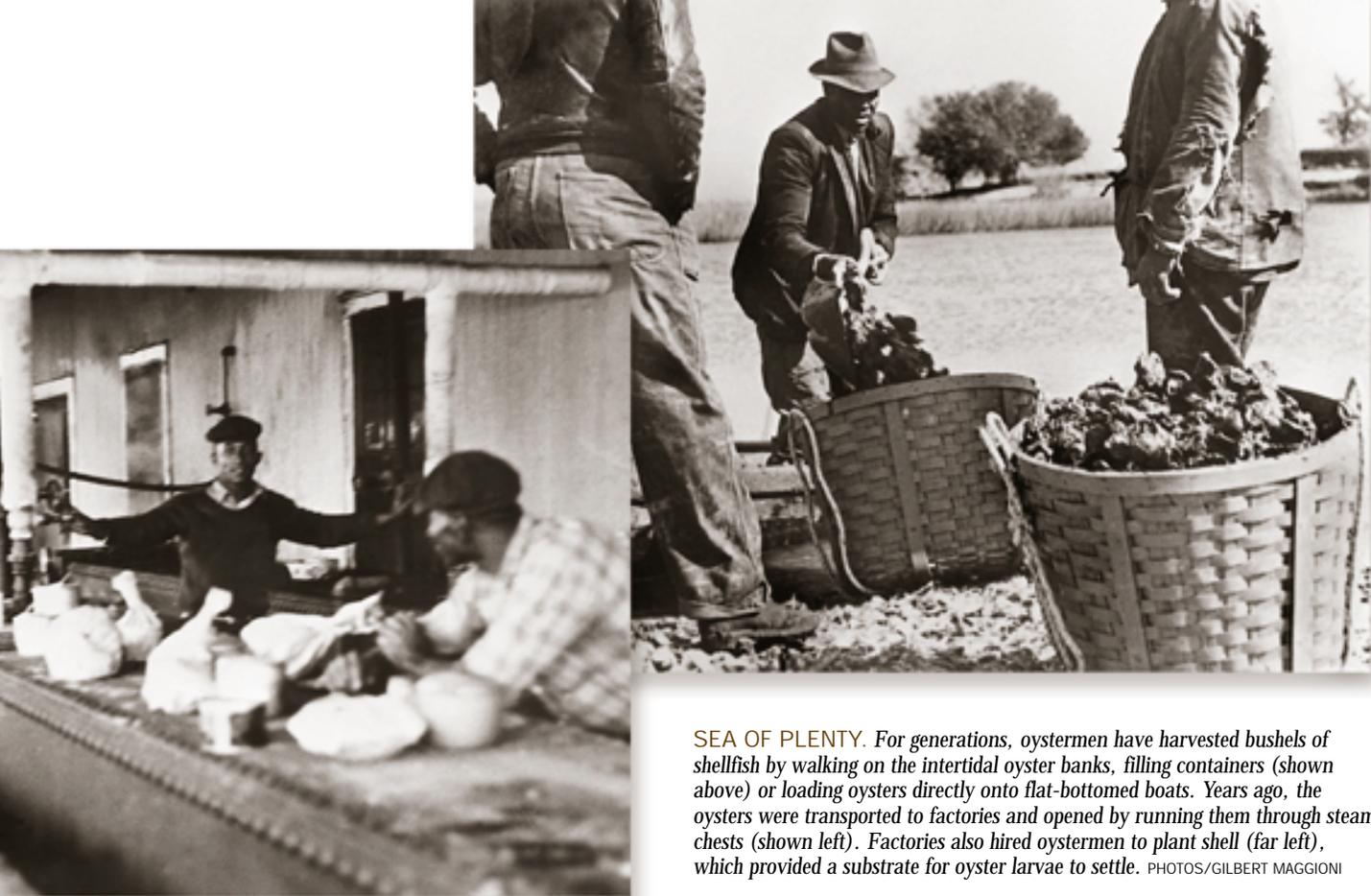
Keith, S.C. Department of Natural Resources (DNR) shellfish management chief. But in the decades following

World War II, a new

economy changed all that. By the mid-1960s, nearly every South Carolina cannery had closed down. Cannery workers migrated to New York and Philadelphia, taking factory jobs with higher wages. African-Americans who stayed "had other opportunities," Keith says, such as working in residential construction.

Although seafood packers and a few shucking houses still supply fresh bivalves for a local market, they're just a shadow of the state's once-mighty oyster industry. Local shellfish are still purchased for wintertime oyster roasts. But many prefer Gulf of Mexico's fresh oysters, which are cheaper. Korea and other Asian nations meanwhile supply nearly all of the canned oysters eaten in the United States.

Environmental conditions are less favorable for oystering today. Runoff pollution affects thousands of acres of South Carolina shellfish beds. Bob Baldwin has seen two major die-offs in the last three years in McClellanville-area oyster beds that he leases from the state. Baldwin suspects that changing water-quality conditions killed the shellfish. "We're changing the environment faster than the



SEA OF PLENTY. For generations, oystermen have harvested bushels of shellfish by walking on the intertidal oyster banks, filling containers (shown above) or loading oysters directly onto flat-bottomed boats. Years ago, the oysters were transported to factories and opened by running them through steam chests (shown left). Factories also hired oystermen to plant shell (far left), which provided a substrate for oyster larvae to settle. PHOTOS/GILBERT MAGGIONI

oysters can adapt. I know I can't depend on oysters anymore." So he will concentrate nearly all of his efforts on clam farming and cultivating wild clam beds.

TASTY SWIMMER

As its scientific name *Callinectes sapidus* (tasty blue swimmer) suggests, the blue crab is a succulent creature, the heart of recipes from crab cakes to "she-crab" soup. Yet the blue crab remains mostly a regional delicacy. Almost all the crab meat harvested worldwide is eaten by Americans on the East and Gulf coasts, from New York to Texas, says Eddie Gordon, owner of the S.C. Crab Company, in McClellanville, and president of the Blue Crab Coalition, a trade organization.

Blue crabs are notoriously tricky to harvest and process. Although recreational baiters can easily catch enough crabs for a single meal, it takes skill and

experience to harvest them in commercially valuable quantities, noted author William W. Warner in his classic 1976 book *Beautiful Swimmers*. And even when you haul in enough to sell, they're very sensitive creatures, dying quickly in hot weather. A blue crab is 85 percent shell by weight, and pickers must train for weeks to learn how to quickly extract crab meat for processing.

For many years, the crab market was limited to fresh ones caught from the Chesapeake Bay. Processors tried to store crab meat in cans, but canned crab didn't taste or look right, and consumers rejected it. Then in 1937, a scientist hired by entrepreneur Sterling Harris discovered an aluminum-sulfate canning dip that left crab meat pearly white and didn't ruin its flavor. With the aid of this special dip, Harris started the Blue Channel Corporation in Beaufort County and became the largest processor of blue crab in the world for many years.

"When I was a boy in the 1940s," says Anthony Lettich, "you'd see 50 to 60 people sitting around a table picking crabs at the crab meat factory in Port Royal. You could smell crabs all over the area when the wind was right."

Then, in 1951, inventors learned how to pasteurize crab meat. During pasteurization, intense heat is applied to the meat, which is then immersed in a very cold water, sealed, and refrigerated. Pasteurized meat, which can be kept in a refrigerator from six months to a year, is said to taste like the fresh crab prized by high-quality restaurants.

By the 1960s, two large crab processing operations and several small plants existed in Beaufort County. Now there's just one left—J & D Enterprises—and it's operating half-time. Gordon's factory in Charleston County is the last full-time crab processing operation in the state.

Floods of imported, inexpensive Asian crab imports have recently driven prices down. The domestic blue

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crab market is being "taken over," Gordon says, by U.S. companies that went overseas and built plants that processed Asian crabs, which were sold to Americans.

The blue crab and the Asian crab are different species. Compared to the Asian crab, "our blue crab is a superior quality product in terms of taste and freshness," says Gordon. But many consumers apparently don't notice the distinction. In just the last six years, one third of the domestic U.S. crab-processing industry has gone out of business. In China, crab processors can

pay their workers 18 cents an hour, says Gordon. "I've got more in Social Security (payments for workers) than (overseas processors) have in wages," he adds. Now the Blue Crab Coalition is trying to establish

American Blue Crab as a brand name similar to Vidalia Onions and Angus Beef, so consumers can differentiate between domestic blue crabs and Asian crabs.

There is a strong "basket trade" in hard-shell blue crabs, which are shipped live on trucks year-round from South Carolina to the mid-Atlantic region. Soft crabs are shed in the late spring or early summer and add to crabbers' income. Blue crab catches have been down over the past two years, so local crabbers have received unusually high prices for their product, says Jerry Gault, an owner of J & D Enterprises and president of the S.C. Crab Industry Association, a trade group. And because fishermen are getting such high prices, they don't recognize Asian crabs as a threat. "As long as there's a shortage of blue crabs, the problem is disguised," says Gault.

Only about 30 percent of state crabs are sold fresh, says Gordon. The other 70 percent are canned or pasteurized. Fresh crab buyers take only the biggest ones; smaller crabs are sold to processors. "What do you do with the leftover crabs," he asks, if American processors go out of business? "There are going to be a lot of crabs with no home."

But Larry DeLancey, DNR chief of crustacean management, gives two reasons why the local crab fishery could stay healthy long-term. The trade in live crabs



SHIP 'EM OUT. An oyster boat in the 1920's—a heyday of the oyster industry in South Carolina. PHOTO/STEVE FLOWERS

remains vigorous, and overhead costs are low, allowing new people into the fishery. A fisherman can invest \$30,000 in a small boat (compared to \$350,000 for a fully outfitted shrimp vessel), purchase traps, get a license, and make a decent living.

That's rock bottom though, says Arthur Ford, a long-time Beaufort County crabber who has poured \$50,000 in his boat and works 300 traps. "To really make a living, you have to invest."

PINK MORSELS

The state's shrimping industry got underway in 1925, says long-time fisherman Jack Chaplin of St. Helena Island, when a fleet of Florida trawlers arrived in Beaufort County. The Florida fishermen packed iced shrimp in wooden barrels and



BREAKING EVEN. "You have to spend \$50 before you even leave the dock" on gasoline and menhaden as crab bait, says Burnie Jackson, shown here on a chilly December morning motoring back to the Jeremy Creek boat landing. Finding only a handful of crabs in his traps, he caught two bushels that morning, barely enough to pay for his expenses.

PHOTO/WADE SPEES



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rolled the barrels into refrigerated railroad cars that rumbled up to New York. In the early days, nearly all shrimpers in local waters lived somewhere else and fished here part-time. Many were first- or second-generation Americans from southern Europe—Portugal, Croatia, and Italy. In 1934, there were 275 registered shrimp boats in Florida, 149 in Georgia, and only five in South Carolina.

Through the 1940s, South Carolina fell behind Georgia and North Carolina in providing dockside facilities and packing for harvesters. Georgia fishermen used Savannah docks, selling to dealers and processors who managed canneries and freezing plants. In Morehead City, N.C., the town built wharves and docking facilities and a special freezer for seafood. But South Carolina lacked a shrimp cannery, and there were inadequate facilities to handle the fresh catch, according to a 1944 study by G. Robert Lunz, Jr., of the Charleston Museum. He noted that “no town in South Carolina has provided first-class accommodations where a fishing vessel can readily get supplies, fuel, water, ice, and above all, adequate and safe docking facilities.”

Today, after a South Carolina fisherman carries his catch to dock, a local packer sells it to a national

distributor who, in turn, sells it frozen to grocery stores and restaurants. Virtually all shrimp consumed in the United States get funneled through giant distributing companies that handle both wild-harvested and farm-raised crustaceans from around the world.

Taking a breather from the late July heat in his air-conditioned boat cabin, Jimmy Scott rubs his thick red-gray beard and recalls when prices for shrimp plummeted. After building his 68-foot ship *Mary Margaret* in 1973, he made good money trawling from his base in McClellanville for about a decade, but then imports from South America and Asia drove down prices. “It was about the mid-eighties,” he says, “when it got harder and harder to make a profit from shrimping.”

Only about 20 to 30 percent of shrimp eaten by Americans are caught or raised in United States; the rest are farm-raised overseas. So when you eat those pink morsels in a local restaurant, they’re likelier to hail from South American or Asian wild harvests and farms than harvested from the waters off the South Carolina coast. “The domestic market doesn’t really need us anymore,” says Scott. “It can be supplied by farm-raised imports.”

In the mid-1990s, local fishermen got a lift from an international aquaculture crisis. Shrimp viruses spread rapidly from farm to farm, country to country, and production collapsed. With demand for shrimp high and volume low, prices shot up. But when scientists and farmers learn how to control viruses, farm-raised shrimp will likely flood the market again, and that could drive prices off a cliff.

Faced with rising fuel and equipment costs and large mortgages on their boats, “shrimpers already operate on a tight margin,” says DeLancey. Everyone agrees that too many boats are chasing too few shrimp, though the number of in-state shrimp captains declined from 1,100 in 1983 to 570 in 1998. Out-of-state shrimp captains in South Carolina waters declined from 430 in 1982 to 300 in 1998.



EXTRA MEASURES. Crabber Burnie Jackson measures a blue crab, which must be at least five inches from spine to spine to be legally harvested. PHOTO/WADE SPEES

WHAT'S THE FUTURE?

Over the next few decades, there will be fewer seafood harvesters around the world, experts say. Fishermen will retire and younger people will be reluctant to take up the trade. Some resources will be depleted or polluted. There will be tighter access restrictions to fishing grounds, with more limits and controls on fishing licenses, according to a 1996 report by the International Food Policy Research Institute.

New technologies and products will continue replacing traditional ones. Overseas aquaculture operations could eventually drive many local shrimp harvesters out of business, and Asian crab imports could push American processors to the brink. "Some people see us as a disposable market that can be given to the Third World," says Gordon.

If the state's fishing industry fades away, coastal communities, with some exceptions, probably wouldn't be damaged economically. The tourism and retirement industries are pumping more wealth into towns and cities than fishing businesses ever could. With easy access to all varieties of fish and shellfish from around the world, many coastal residents wouldn't notice if fishermen were no longer working local waters.

But, of course, a piece of South Carolina culture would be lost. As global economy brings greater prosperity, it also shatters traditions. Today's seafood industry is a link to artisanal fishermen who rowed and sailed into the estuaries and coastal ocean with rough hooks and nets. Fishermen represent the continuity between generations, parents teaching their children, passing down crafts and skills. Junior Magwood learned his trade from his cousin. Other



WATER WISE. Sinh Cong poles his oyster boat along the dock at the Bluffton Oyster Factory. He was a merchant seaman in Vietnam, but left the country just two days before Saigon fell in 1975. He's worked as an oysterman and fisherman in the United States ever since. PHOTO/WADE SPEES

fishermen learned from fathers and uncles. Some seafood businesses are still family-run, with brothers and sisters working side by side for decades. Yet not every family story is a happy one, of course. There are memories of deep rifts between siblings, of businesses split up, of back-breaking hours, of tragic accidents and terrifying storms. Still, these darker elements are proof of what hardship men and women

endured as they wrested a living from the sea.

Yet, some fishermen say they'll keep working as long as they can. They like their independence and enjoy spending days on the water. "I'm sure that (South Carolina commercial fishing) is declining," says DeLancey. "It's a hard way to make a living. But somebody's always going to be doing it, because there's money to be made out there." 